

A brief narrative for NRCA Program origin and development

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2. Framing NRCA Projects & the Pilot NRCAs (2005 - 2009)

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1. Program Origin & the “Early Years”

Starting in 2003, the Water Resources Division received a base funding increase through the Natural Resource Challenge to systematically assess watershed resource conditions in national park units. The division established the Watershed Condition Assessment Program to oversee and implement this effort.

***Program Title Change:** The initial program title was the Watershed Condition Assessment (WCA) Program. This created confusion for many people, who assumed it would therefore emphasize traditional watershed assessments. Since most of the program funding (at least until 2014) is dedicated to an “ecological assessment” project series, it was renamed as the Natural Resource Condition Assessment (NRCA) Program in 2009. The WCA Program name still exists in legacy documents stored on this website.*

In the early years, while deliberations were underway to determine the type of natural resource assessment project(s) to fund over the longer term, funding was provided for:

- A project series to assess coastal water resources and watershed conditions in a number of park units with significant coastal and marine resources
(see *Coastal/Marine link on NRCA Home Page*)
- A backlog of watershed resource and water quality assessment projects identified in the NPS Project Management Information System (PMIS).
(see *annual division Reports to Congress; last year of funding = FY2007*)
- Critical projects that address emerging, high-priority, park watershed condition issues that, because of the applicable timeframes, could not be appropriately directed through the Water Resources Division Competitive Project Program
(a *continuing program commitment*)
- Development of a web-based Compendium of Ecological Assessment Methods (CEAM) to help resource managers identify assessment methodologies appropriate to their setting and information need or question
(see *CEAM link, posted at the NRCA Project Page / Useful References*)

2. Framing NRCA Projects & the Pilot NRCAs (2005 - 2009)

In summer 2005, over 30 NPS personnel from Parks and Regional/Washington science-support offices gathered to discuss options for the type of natural resource assessment project(s) that the program should fund. Based on recommendations from that group as well as executive decisions by leadership in the Natural Resources Stewardship and Science directorate, the following decisions were made:

- A comparable resource assessment will be funded for each of the 270-plus parks served by the 32 NPS Inventory & Monitoring Program networks
- Projects will provide an multi-disciplinary synthesis of existing scientific data and information from the NPS I&M Program and other sources—taken together, what does the available science tell us about current resource conditions
- Projects will emphasize GIS (map) products in addition to narrative resource condition summaries
- Park managers and NPS planners are the primary target audience and two anticipated uses for assessment products are: 1) resource condition reporting to the GPRA “land health” goals; 2) development of a park Resource Stewardship Strategy (secondary audiences and uses were also identified)
- Projects are modestly funded and completed in a relatively short (~2 year) timeframe so that most parks will have completed report or a funded project underway by 2014
- Regional science offices will oversee program implementation for their Region and manage the individual projects; WASO will provide national guidance for all projects, and technical assistance to individual projects on an as-requested basis
- A set of pilot projects will be used to test different study approaches and showcase good product examples—ideally, one or a few of these will become the model or template to guide all future projects

A set of pilot assessment projects were initiated in 2006. As these projects were ongoing, additional projects were initiated in 2007 and 2008 with the to-date “lessons learned” informally incorporated into the subsequent year startups. A driving objective was to expand the boundaries from a traditional literature review, to pursue a more quantitative and spatially-based evaluation of current condition status for a set of resource indicators, and overall conditions by park areas.

3. “Lessons Learned” & Revised NRCA Guidance (2009)

In spring 2009, approximately 30 NPS personnel from Parks and Regional/Washington science-support offices gathered again to discuss “lessons learned” from the pilot projects and to develop recommendations for new NRCA standards and guidance going forward. Only one of the pilot reports was completed at the time of the meeting, though others were available in draft form. None of the pilots examined as part of this meeting delivered everything, though each of them included good product pieces (e.g., a particular report section, a good summary table, good map displays).

Areas for improvement, as identified by the review, are currently being addressed. For example, since NRCAs are a national project series with no clear precedent, the NRPC is providing clearer guidance on standard elements (study design, reporting products) needed to achieve overall consistency across projects. The NRPC is also in the process of identifying good products from the pilot projects to give parks units and future study investigators clear examples for what a successful NRCA project outcome and products look like. Within the sideboards established by the standard elements, flexibility is still allowed to tailor important study details to match park specific circumstances.

Steps are being taken to address the fact that NRCAs are costing more than anticipated, largely due to their multi-disciplinary (ecological) study scope and the requirement for high quality GIS (map) products. New options are being offered to Regions for how to support the project management workload which entails, among other responsibilities, substantial within-NPS coordination to deliver existing NPS science into these projects and a time commitment to oversee technical and administrative peer review for NRCA reporting products.

As of fall 2009, a new set of project guidance was developed by the Washington office, incorporating feedback and lessons learned from the 2009 review process. Due by late fall 2009: Each Region has the option to propose a revised project management and funding model to the NRPC in the coming months. As part of this, Regions can consider whether they want to increase funding for their NRCA projects, thus lengthening the timeframe for completing one for all of their park units served by the Inventory and Monitoring Program. Regions can also consider whether they want to tap a modest amount of NRPC project funding from their annual project allocation to support the project management workload.